

*From Mary to Charlotte:  
English Female Authors and Their Thirst for Freedom*



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## Introduction

In 1999 a film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* was released. In this version of Austen's novel it cannot be overlooked that the main character, Fanny Price, takes more after Jane Austen than she does after the main character in the novel. The Fanny Price Austen described is not looked upon with much respect nowadays. This young woman was subordinate, fragile and moral to the point of annoyance. There are not many people who would enjoy seeing a movie with a main character who appears to have no spine. So when movie director Patricia Rozema was approached to direct *Mansfield Park* she chose to incorporate some of Austen's letters and her early journals (Rozema). By doing so she not only bent the storyline a little but she also created a character more acceptable to today's audience. Many movies that are based on novels stray from the original story; the character change of Fanny is nothing new. However, giving more spirit to a Jane Austen character is quite common. Austen has been described as a feminist, as a woman far ahead of her time. After all, she wrote *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, novels where we read about heroines who are not dominated by men like most women were in Austen's lifetime. The fact that she also created a character like Fanny Price, who is the opposite of the sort of woman feminists long to see, is not much dwelt upon. What is interesting to note is that *Mansfield Park* is the novel most Austen fans like the least, if they like it at all, while in Austen's time *Mansfield Park* was valued more than any of her other novels. Women back then saw in Fanny the type of woman they longed to be.

In Western society of today women have rights, rights some women dared not even dream of in Austen's time. These rights were acquired through hard work and the process was long and laborious; politics are as old as man but it will be a few more years before women can celebrate their centennial with regard to the female vote. When one reads a period novel on relationships between men and women written in Austen's day for its historical value, female submissiveness often cannot be ignored. However, when such a novel is read for entertainment purposes it is often very easy to be swept away by the romance of it all. Works like those by Austen can be interpreted in many ways. No one can possibly find all of Rozema's Fanny in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, but on other levels and in other ways Austen's novels are great food for contemplation. Austen has become very important for those who study gender and gender relations in literature.

Most feminist studies have represented Austen as a conscious or unconscious subversive voicing a woman's frustration at the rigid and sexist social order which enforces women's subservience and dependence, though many feminist critics, as Julia Prewitt Brown notes, are distinctly uncomfortable with what they see as Austen's "cowardly accommodations" with the patriarchal order. (Morrison 1994: 337)

This is a perfect example of reading a period novel in different ways. Some studies claim that Austen was a feminist and that her dislike of the patriarchal society she was living in can be found in her novels. "Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power" (Lerner 1986: 239). Other critics – like Julia Prewitt Brown – state that Austen might not have liked the place women had in society but that she did not do anything about it; and disliking the position of women does not make a person a feminist.

The debate on whether or not Austen was a feminist has been going on for decades and the question is still not close to being answered, which is not surprising; this is a different era. Things Austen wrote might have meant something different in her time than they do today. Austen is not the only female author whose work has been subjected to many interpretations; Frances Burney, Charlotte Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft have also been discussed numerous times since their works were published. These four female authors share more than the honor of being relevant to this day; all of them were English and writing actively between 1750 and 1850, a turbulent time in English history, also known as the Industrial Revolution. All these women have written on subjects that were very much of interest then, namely the relationship between men and women and with that the position of women in society. These subjects are very interesting for feminists nowadays as well, for obvious reasons.

In this thesis I intend to look at the way Burney, Austen and Brontë portrayed relationships between men and women in the novels *Evelina*, *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. I will do this by looking at the way they described for instance the marriage-plot and the patriarchy. I will analyze Wollstonecraft in a different manner, as explained in the next paragraph. I plan to compare the way the three aforementioned novels were viewed when they were first published with the way they tend to be interpreted now. Is it possible to give a modern

meaning to these texts that were written centuries ago – e.g. labeling them feministic – and if so; does that meaning resemble the meaning the texts had when they were first published?

In 1851 the term feminism meant “the state of being feminine”; from 1895 onwards feminism referred to “the advocacy of women’s rights” (Online Etymology Dictionary). These dates show that the authors I will be discussing wrote their novels without any knowledge of the term feminism as we know it today. However, the desire to live in a society where men and women are equal existed long before 1895. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this pamphlet Wollstonecraft describes how e.g. lack of proper education is to blame for female subordination. This was not the first written work on how women should be allowed to obtain more education and thus more power. “But Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* was unprecedented in its firsthand observations of the disabilities and indignities suffered by women and in the articulateness and passion with which it exposed and decried this injustice” (Abrams 2001: 1404). After she died aged 38, an account of Wollstonecraft’s private life was published by her widower in *Memoires of the Author of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”*. The life Wollstonecraft had lived was quite scandalous in those days; due to all those personal details becoming public, Wollstonecraft was burdened with a disgraceful reputation and her *Vindication* was ignored well through the Victorian era. “It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... that Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* gained wide spread recognition as a classic in the literature not only of women’s rights but of the general analysis of the role played by class and gender in the structure of power and domination in modern society” (Abrams 2001: 1405). I will use Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* as an example of feminism in the 1800s; in all the other works I will be discussing I will look for traces of what Wollstonecraft perceived as female rights.

After defining feminism at the turn of the century I will focus on Frances Burney. It is true that Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet was published more than a decade after the work of Burney that I will be discussing. However, Burney allegedly displayed some aspects of what can be described as feminism before *Vindication* came into existence (Doody 1988:42). Burney’s writing seems proper and modest, just like the author. However, there was more to her and her writing than most people could see. The critic Samuel Johnson once declared: “your [Burney’s] shyness, & slyness, & pretending to know nothing, never took *me* in, whatever you may do with others. *I* always knew you for a *toadling!*” (Abrams 2001: 1301). There is a legend that states that little toads carry poison, despite their submissive look (Abrams 2001: 1301). According to Margaret Lenta “... Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, is weakened by the author’s reluctance to overstep the limits proper for women...” Due to this

she finds the novel dull and lacking in strength (Lenta 1981: 28). Maybe Lenta is mistaken; maybe *Evelina* is filled with very well hidden remarks on subjects that were very improper for women in those days. Perhaps those remarks can only be seen by a contemporary of Burney, like Johnson. The difference between Johnson's remarks and Lenta's opinion make *Evelina* an interesting novel to investigate further and I intend to do just that.

As mentioned before Jane Austen has been interpreted in many ways. To attempt to determine her stance in the debate on women's rights, I have decided to take a closer look at her 1816 novel *Emma*. In *Emma* we find a heroine who seems to have a relative amount of power, not just over her own life but over that of others as well. Of Emma, Austen once declared: "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like" (Johnson 1990: 122). Emma is Austen's most stubborn heroine; she does as she pleases without even considering the possibility that she might be acting out of place; if any of Austen's female characters display symptoms of feminism, it must be Emma and thus I have chosen this Austen novel to analyze in this context.

Charlotte Brontë died when she was 38. Despite her short lifespan and thus the short time she spent writing – she finished four novels – Brontë, together with her sisters Anne and Emily, has received more critical attention than any other 19<sup>th</sup> century British author, save perhaps the poet John Keats (McNees 1996: 3). In 1847, Brontë published *Jane Eyre*. In this novel we find a heroine who is treated unfairly and with cruelty throughout most of her childhood, yet she remains friendly to those who deserve it and at times to those who do not deserve it without forgetting who she is and what she believes in. When it comes to making a critical assessment of a work by a Brontë most critics find it difficult to distinguish the biographical from the critical response; they attribute values to the sisters' characters, values that might only exist in their fiction. "It informs such ideologically disparate interpretations as Gilbert's [sic] and Gubar's feministic reading of *Jane Eyre*..." (McNees 1996: 3). This quotation implies that feminism can be found in *Jane Eyre* because Brontë was a feminist or at least had some feminist thoughts. According to Robert B. Martin, Brontë's novel is essentially protofeminist:

The novel is frequently cited as the earliest major feminist novel, although there is not a hint in the book of any desire for political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes. Miss Bronte [sic] asks only for the simple — or is it the most complex? — recognition that the same heart and the same spirit animate both men and women, and that love is the pairing of equals in these spheres. . . . The

famous plea that women ought not to be confined ‘to making pudding and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags’ [Chap. 12] is not propaganda for equal employment but for a recognition of woman’s emotional nature. The condemnation of women to a place apart results in the creation of empty, capricious women like Blanche Ingram, who tyrannize over men whenever possible, indulge in dreams of Corsair lovers, and can communicate only in the Byronic language of outdated romantic fiction. Only equals like Jane and Rochester dare to speak truth couched in language of unadorned directness. (Landow 2002)

Nowadays *Jane Eyre* is viewed as one of the most romantic novels in western, literary history: a young girl falls in love with a man who loves her as well and despite all their misfortunes they eventually find each other, very romantic indeed. However, there is much more to this story. *Jane Eyre* shows us “a woman’s relentless struggle for emotional and spiritual satisfaction” (Burns 2004). I have chosen this novel because the majority of its readers today – I am not referring to critics – see it as a romantic story and nothing else. Novels like these indicate that certain elements in older texts are overlooked nowadays. When *Jane Eyre* came out it was applauded for its: “insight into the human heart, vigorous style and above all its ‘truth’, enhanced by the author’s choice of an unconventionally plain woman as heroine” (Alexander 2003: 273). However, it was also criticized for its: “insidious and debased tendencies, immorality, extravagant and disgusting scenes: religion was ‘stabbed in the dark’ by a novelist who attempted to level social distinctions and do away with morality” (Alexander 2003: 273). This novel surely must contain more than the story of a girl in love to incite such hard criticism. I intend to look at Brontë’s alleged attempts to “level social distinctions” and I will determine if those attempts have any connection to feminism.

It is important to take a closer look at texts that were written centuries ago and to compare the way they were perceived in the discourse of their time with the way they are viewed nowadays because it leads to a better understanding of the way we use literature. It cannot be denied that there were authors who used the written word to express their opinion; Mary Wollstonecraft is a perfect example of that. However, there is a difference between a pamphlet and a novel. A pamphlet is known to directly manifest the sentiments of the author; a novel is often ambiguous, thus making it harder to establish the author’s viewpoints. Despite this fact it must be stated that even pamphlets can have many meanings. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* contains many references to religion, but religion – especially its importance to Wollstonecraft’s feminism – is not always mentioned when this work is discussed. Like

novels some pamphlets contain layers and the interpretation of those layers can vary from person to person.

Jane Austen's work is being taught all over the world; ascertaining the meaning of her works cannot be done without knowledge of what it meant as a woman to write in those times. Perhaps her work does allude to her desire to see women established as the equals of men, as can allegedly be deduced from the feminist dialogue from her character Mrs. Elton in *Emma*. Upon hearing that Mr. Weston has opened Mrs. Weston's mail, Mrs. Elton turns to him, laughing affectedly and declares: "... I must protest against that.—A most dangerous precedent indeed!—I beg you will not let your neighbours follow your example.—Upon my word, if this is what I am to expect, we married women must begin to exert ourselves!—Oh! Mr Weston, I could not have believed it of you!" (Austen 1994: 231). Devoney Looser, editor of *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, implies that Austen frustrates critics with characters like Mrs. Elton because she gives her lines of anti-feminist dialogue as well (Looser 2003). What complicates matters even further is the fact that Mrs. Elton is not the character the majority of critics would focus on in their attempts to determine Austen's political stance. The main character is regarded as the author's mouthpiece; Emma's viewpoints are considered to be of more importance.

The debate on how certain English, female authors who wrote during the Industrial Revolution longed to see women positioned in society is an ongoing one. Many critics focus on the way the texts might be interpreted today; I think that cannot be done without taking feminism during 1750 to 1850 into consideration. By placing texts in their proper context we should be able to determine more of what the author alluded to and once we know more about an author's stance amidst a certain discourse we are a step closer to determining the importance of a literary work at the time it was first published. Without that knowledge we are incapable of valuing a text properly. I will begin with Mary Wollstonecraft and the definition of feminism around the 1800s; the rest of the novels will be analyzed in the order in which they were published, *Evelina* (1778), *Emma* (1816) and *Jane Eyre* (1847). I have chosen this sequence in order to investigate if feminism becomes more noticeable in the novels as time progresses. It is easy to attribute certain values to an author based on what a critic might think can be deduced from a novel. However, if the fact that that novel was written in a different time by an author who surely had different values is ignored then that critic – and all who agree with him – does not do that author justice.



## 1. Mary Wollstonecraft and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

### 1.1 Mary

Mary Wollstonecraft was a “dauntless advocate of political reform” (Johnson 2002: 1) who longed for equality between men and women. Born in 1759 as the second child of an abusive father and a mother who lacked the courage to stand up to her husband, Wollstonecraft learned from an early age on how damaging a relationship could be where one is domineering and the other is submissive (Abrams 2001: 1404). Wollstonecraft is mainly known for her opinion on gender equality, but she spent the majority of her adult life preoccupied with politics as a whole. In 1784, Wollstonecraft met the Reverend Richard Price; she opened a school near his chapel and she began attending his services. Price was also a radical author who wrote about his rejection of original sin and his belief in individual conscience and reason (Spartacus). Due to Price and her publisher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft became part of a society that included e.g. Dissenters of many sectarian persuasions, provincial and metropolitan radicals and liberal Churchmen.

As a republican Wollstonecraft “hoped for the disappearance of monarchy and inherited distinctions”; she was an admirer of “democratists” like the Englishman Thomas Paine (Johnson 2002: 43). Like Paine, Wollstonecraft supported the French Revolution and in 1790, she became actively involved in the debate between intellectuals who opposed the French Revolution and those who stood by it. Price sided with the French Revolutionaries; in a sermon he delivered in 1789, he declared that kings should consider themselves servants of their people instead of sovereigns (Burke 1951). In his pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Irish author Edmund Burke spoke out against the Revolution; he defended the monarchy and the aristocracy. Burke also criticized Price’s sermon and thus his point of view by stating that:

That sermon is in a strain which I believe has not been heard in this kingdom, in any of the pulpits which are tolerated or encouraged in it, since die [sic] year 1648; when a predecessor of Dr. Price, the Rev. Hugh Peters, made the vault of the king’s own chapel at St. James’s ring with the honour and privilege of the saints, who, with the high praises of God in their mouths, and a two-edged sword in their hands, were to execute judgment on the heathen, and punishments upon the people; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron. (Burke 1951)

The Reverend Hugh Peters was found guilty of abetting the execution of King Charles I and he was executed; by comparing Price to Peters, Burke is making quite a statement.

In reaction to Burke's tract, Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. In this pamphlet directed at Burke – the full title is *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* – she defends Price and she declares that without wide diffusion of happiness and power among all citizens there can be no true civilization (Johnson 2002: 52). Wollstonecraft's disgust with Burke's description of e.g. poor people is very noticeable in her pamphlet, her feelings on certain subjects are definitely detectable yet her work is not written in an overly sensitive style. Wollstonecraft's arguments are powerful and her work was very successful (Abrams 2001: 1404). Two years later she published a tract focused on the underprivileged status of women: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

## 1.2 Mary's Feminism

Religion does not seem to play a major role in the study of feminism. Claudia L. Johnson notes that: "Historians seeking to identify the origins of modern Western feminism have generally located them in secular developments: the rise of liberal political ideas, the reformist intellectual programme inaugurated by Enlightenment [sic], the expressive opportunities opened to women by the eighteenth-century expansion of the print culture" (Johnson 2002: 103). It cannot be denied that the aforementioned changes have played an important role in the formation of feminism as we know it today; however, a very significant aspect is often ignored: religion. As one of the founding mothers of modern feminism, Wollstonecraft is frequently mentioned. However, the religious aspects that influenced her thinking on this subject are often ignored.

The majority of Wollstonecraft's admirers prefer to see her outside a religious context, which is not surprising. The church will always be the institution that blames the frailty of Eve – mother to all women – for the consumption of the apple and thus the damnation of mankind, and the lack of friendliness towards women does not end there. Christianity – among many other religions – has a history of trying to keep women "in their place". Yet the explicitly feministic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is filled with religion. That fact can only be overlooked if a reader makes a conscious decision to do so. Before I go any further it has to be said that Wollstonecraft's religion was not the religion of any institution known to us although similarities with Christianity cannot be overlooked. According to her friend, Mary Hays, Wollstonecraft's God was: "a higher being, more perfect, than visible

nature” whom she “adored ... amidst the beauties of Nature, or ... in the still hour of recollection” (Johnson 2002: 101).

Wollstonecraft does refer to certain aspects of Christianity to prove her point. For instance, in the Ten Commandments it is stated that mankind must worship God and God alone. If that is the case, then women should not enslave themselves to please men, they should not bow to the will of a man because the only one they should obey is God.

*Vindication* is generally placed in a tradition of enlightenment humanism that is perceived to be either indifferent or actively hostile to religion (Johnson 2002: 99). Yet without including religion in a study of Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet, its meaning can never fully be understood. Wollstonecraft attributed her ability to reason to God and she relied on Him for the support of her virtue; due to God she knew the place women ought to have in society and how women ought to act. In other words it was due to God that she became a feminist (Johnson 2002: 100).

According to historian Barbara Taylor, protofeminism cannot be studied without looking at religion “or rather that body of Christian doctrine which, at its most consistent, had strongly positive implications for women’s private and public status” (Johnson 2002: 103). Wollstonecraft went to church on a regular basis the first 28 years of her life; in her later years she challenged the Church of England. In her last published book she even wrote approvingly of people who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ and questioned the necessity of the Christian system (Johnson 2002: 100). The church had disappointed Wollstonecraft; she wanted to believe in something but she could not believe in a system that neglected so many layers of society. For instance, the church teaches that even when you are poor you should count what little blessings you have; your circumstances are in God’s hands and thus it must be His will that you are poor. Wollstonecraft did not agree with that; man was created equal and thus every person should be allowed to strive for what his or her neighbor has.

Despite her unwillingness to attach herself to a religion that was already formed, Wollstonecraft was surrounded by Christianity, hence the references to that religion in her work. Wollstonecraft needed to believe in a higher being because she needed something to hold on to. In one of numerous arguments on religion with her atheist husband William Godwin she declared: “How can you blame me for taking refuge in the idea of a God, when I despair of finding sincerity here on earth?” (Johnson 2002: 101). Even in her attack on misogynists Wollstonecraft made use of religion; she accused them of having a Muslim viewpoint on women. Back then Europeans were under the impression that the Koran stated that women have no souls (Abrams 2001: 1406).

Wollstonecraft's feminism sprang from her love for a higher being. She believed women were equal to men and that they should be given the same chances because they were both created by the same being with the same purpose; to serve Him and to live in His image.

... men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect." (Wollstonecraft 2001: Introduction)

Wollstonecraft does not place all the blame with men; women are guilty of their own subordination as well. Instead of choosing to become persons worthy in the eyes of God, persons who make their own decisions and live their lives to serve God, women go along with everything the majority of people around them are telling them and they aim their life at obtaining a husband and serving him until they die. Many women were afraid that showing "male qualities" such as having an opinion on anything that was not considered female business would make them look masculine. Wollstonecraft was not taken aback by that "expletive"; if thinking for yourself, stepping out of the shadow of men and thus elevating yourself to the status of a human being instead of a woman, meant that you were a masculine woman then so be it.

The most important goal in every person's life should be developing a character as a human being "regardless of the distinction of sex" (Wollstonecraft 2001: Introduction). No more raising women to become only obedient wives and soft mothers. Wollstonecraft does not make a distinction between men and women alone; she also distinguishes men from men. According to her, members of the standing army had a lot in common with women.

... idle superficial young men, whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners render vice more dangerous, by concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery. An air of fashion, which is but a badge of slavery, and proves that the soul has not a strong individual character..." (Wollstonecraft 2001: Chapter 1)

In both situations lack of education is to blame; men from the standing army were sent out into the world before they had a chance to be properly educated and women were never

properly educated, thus these groups are more susceptible to moral failing. Men perceive women as weak, but how can they be strong if they are considered unable to fend for themselves from the day they are born? You can only do God's bidding; you can only worship Him completely, if you are free. On women's servility towards men, Wollstonecraft declared in her *Vindication*: "If men be demi-gods, why let us serve them!" (Wollstonecraft 2001: Chapter 3). As yet there has been no reason to assume that men are of bigger importance in the eyes of God than women. There was definitely no difference for the God Wollstonecraft worshipped.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is highly feministic, but it would not be without the religious aspects. Wollstonecraft extracted her opinions from her beliefs. She was not merely teaching that women should be valued as the equals of men; she declared that every human being was created equal by God's hand and that they should live their lives serving only Him. "If no priest may stand between creature and Creator, why should a mere man stand between a woman and her God?" (Johnson 2002: 109). A place by God's throne is reserved for those who are free to act and think for themselves. Taking this into consideration, being a free woman meant more than making decisions based on your own rationality; it was the only way towards eternal salvation. If religion is ignored while studying Wollstonecraft's feminism "we lose both the historic woman and her principal mission: to liberate women from masculine tyranny not in order that they should become free-floating agents, stripped of all obligatory ties, but in order to bind them more closely to their God" (Johnson 2002: 116). The refusal of some contemporary feminists to include religion while reflecting on *Vindication* is understandable; they prefer to read about women being freed so they can do what they want, not so they can serve another master, albeit God. However it cannot be denied that this was the message Wollstonecraft was trying to put across.

### **1.3 Other Forms of Feminism Circa 1800**

I have chosen *Vindication* as an example of feminism around the 1800s, but there were other women in Wollstonecraft's time with thoughts on feminism that differed from hers. The most influential woman in Wollstonecraft's day was philanthropist Hannah More. Like Wollstonecraft she believed that it was up to women to carry out moral reforms to advance the progress of civilization. Both women wanted society to change and both women were under the impression that women had to play a significant role in bringing about that change. However, unlike Wollstonecraft, More insisted that there was an innate difference between the sexes. Where Wollstonecraft stated that the only thing of importance should be the soul,

which has no gender, More believed that men and women possessed different qualities based on their sex (Johnson 2002: 147).

Leading female literary critic Anna Letitia Barbauld disagreed with Wollstonecraft about the proper role of women in society. According to Barbauld women were like delicate flowers. Like More, Barbauld believed in an innate difference between the sexes; men must be left to persuade others with harsh words or other manly methods, women must only use their angelic pureness to achieve something. The obtaining of separate rights should not be an objective; through softness women will coax the harshness out of men. "... separate rights are lost in mutual love..." (Johnson 2002: 154). In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft attacks Barbauld; she finds the comparison between women and delicate flowers highly objectionable. "This debate between Wollstonecraft and Barbauld, together with the program advocated by Hannah More, vividly reveals the very real intellectual and psychological tensions that existed between the leading feminists in England in the 1790s" (Johnson 2002: 154). Despite the difference between these three major players, they agreed on important aspects as well; they were all in favor of radically improving the education of women and they advocated an increase of female control over British political, social and cultural life (Johnson 2002: 154). Many female authors were more moderate in their opinion on e.g. educating women and other feministic topics. In the next chapter I will take a look at Frances Burney and where she might be placed in this debate. *Vindication* will remain the text I will focus on the most – especially Wollstonecraft's stance on religion, education and the innate difference between the sexes – but I will look at More's and Barbauld's perspectives as well.

## **2. Frances Burney and *Evelina***

### **2.1 Burney**

*Evelina; or, A Young Lady's Entrance into the World* has been mentioned as the first novel with detailed insight into the experience of women (Newton 1976: 49). In this novel by Frances Burney, first published in 1778, we are shown “the effects of the usages of the time upon the position and life of a woman” through the eyes of the main character (Newton 1976: 49). The plot of Burney’s first novel is not original; it resembles many stories, not in the least that of *Cinderella* due to Evelina’s poverty and the fact that the man she marries, Lord Orville, is superior to her in every way imaginable. The aspect that distinguishes *Evelina* from other fairytale-like stories is the way Evelina’s happiness comes into existence, i.e. the journey from being falsely labeled a bastard to becoming the wife of a Lord. Burney used *Evelina* to describe what it was like to be a woman in her time. Marriage was perceived as the only suitable goal a woman should strive for. Burney herself did not wed until she was 41 after having refused suitors out of fear that she would die of boredom at their sides (Newton 1976: 48). Burney was not content with the limited options women had, but she was resigned to the fate of her gender; sooner or later every woman had to succumb to the inevitable, even fictitious women. An older school of critics tended to treat *Evelina* as “an attempt to exhibit a variety of manners, with a frame story added to make a plot and to allow these manners to be happily exhibited” (Doody 1988: 40). The horrendous betrayal by Sir John Belmont that deprived Evelina of her licit parentage and thus an immense part of her identity was not seen as an aspect worthy of study. Valuing this novel for its plot is a recent development (Doody 1988: 40).

### **2.2 Marriage-plot Novel**

In the marriage-plot novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the heroine goes through all sorts of ordeals before she finally obtains her main objective: a husband. Marriage-plot novels always end in marriage but the events that take place on the way to the altar can differ immensely. Feminist critics focus mainly on two different styles: the lover-mentor convention and the convention of the perfect heroine. In the conservative lover-mentor convention the heroine is taught a better understanding of life by the man who will make her his wife as soon as her education is completed; the more progressive convention of the perfect heroine portrays a woman who does not need to be educated as she already knows all that matters. Her purpose is to educate others, e.g. by living in a proper manner (Shaffer 1992: 53-55). *Evelina* is raised

by the Reverend Villars in the country, in Berry Hill. Villars keeps her from society to protect her from its venom; after all, legally she is an illegitimate child and that she will remain until her father acknowledges her in court. Taking that into consideration Evelina's lack of knowledge of the customs of society is very understandable. At first she writes to the Reverend Villars to ask him how she must conduct herself, later on in the novel she replaces Villars with Orville. She even draws a comparison between the two: "O, Sir!—was there ever such another man as Lord Orville?—Yes, one other now resides at Berry Hill" (Burney 2004: Letter LXX).

At first glance *Evelina* seems to contain the lover-mentor convention; she is the typical heroine who turns to a man for protection and who looks up to him; Orville, who upon first meeting her, describes her as "A poor weak girl" (Burney 2004: Letter XII). Evelina begins to understand the world better and Orville's affection is won. Evelina also appears to be highly dependent on Villars. In most of her letters to him she asks him for advice on how to behave properly. She goes from Villars' guidance to Orville's protection; clearly a girl who needs to be educated in every stage of her life. This dependence befits the image of a proper lady in a patriarchal society. However, Burney has complicated matters by showing that Evelina can take care of herself as well. The letters that Villars writes to Evelina in response to her questions often come too late; Evelina is forced to make her own decisions and she manages to do that just fine. On occasion it turns out that she has done the opposite of what Villars has suggested and her decision has been the wiser one. According to Julia Shaffer, Evelina is only capable of acting morally when she does not follow the advice of men. "The novel invokes the lover-mentor convention precisely to challenge it by demonstrating that acting properly for a woman may mean departing from male knowledge and male advice" (Shaffer 1992: 60).

Despite Evelina's ability to make decisions without male interference, the novel has more in common with the lover-mentor convention than with the convention of the perfect heroine. Evelina does learn a lot and the more she learns, the duller she gets. In the first two volumes of the novel Evelina can be perceived as an almost satiric observer; the way she looks upon the world then gives her a sense of power, prestige even, despite her unfortunate circumstances. In the third volume, sentiment, not satire, pushes Evelina forward. This volume is more traditional; Burney is clearly making an introduction for a conventional ending. With the disappearance of her satire, Evelina's power fades as well; a necessity in order to become someone's wife (Newton 1976: 54). Burney could not think of marriage without thinking of captivity. In *The Early Diary of Frances Burney*, Burney declares: "O



how short a time does it take to put an eternal end to a woman's liberty" (Doody 1988: 43). However, Burney did make exceptions for love; becoming someone's wife meant giving another control over your life. Surely that sacrifice must be less painful if that someone else is someone you love.

### 2.3 Patriarchy

Even with a mainly satiric protagonist like *Evelina* it cannot be overlooked that Burney seemed resigned to the situation of women in a patriarchal society. During her first ball *Evelina* is quick to notice how the men see themselves in comparison to the women. There are more women than men, so the men are in a position of power. That knowledge, combined with the conviction that in general all women are desperate to obtain a husband and therefore must be desperate to be sought out by a man during any occasion, makes the men act conceitedly. When *Evelina* refuses to dance with Lovel he is outraged and he begins to hound her. Apart from these little reminders of who is in control, *Evelina* is filled with maltreatment of women. This is so imbedded in society; nobody notices it and nobody objects. In order to settle a bet, two men who are well off pay two poor, female octogenarians to run a race. The women fall more than once but the men insist they get up and keep going. This situation is one of many situations in *Evelina* where women are being treated appallingly without anyone thinking it is odd. Burney loved practical jokes and she has included many in her novel; through these jokes she "shows us in extreme form the part played by aggression in social relationships" (Doody 1988: 57). The definition of patriarchy speaks of male dominance over women; Burney makes it clear that this goes beyond men viewing women as inferior beings who should not have a voice. Men also view women as theirs to play with. Sometimes they will use them for their bets, sometimes they will plot to make them their mistress; nobody seems to mind.

The world of *Evelina*, then, is a world in which men appear licensed to abuse women. Only three men, in fact, (Mr. Villars, Lord Orville, and Monsieur Du Bois) characteristically show respect for the feelings and integrity of females. What lies behind this license—and the connection is sometimes consciously articulated—are the conditions of the eighteenth century marriage market, conditions which Burney does not think to protest but which she captures as oppressive. In real life the economic necessity of marriage for women, the scarcity of males, and the surplus of females

must have enforced men's superior status while they underlined women's real situation as prey. (Newton 1976: 50)

In my introduction I mentioned that Margaret Lenta is of the opinion that Burney did not want to overstep the limits proper for women, a decision that weakened *Evelina*. Other recent critics, mainly feminists, agree; due to *Evelina*'s alteration from satirist to proper, conventional young woman, they feel she "acquiesces too readily in the ways of a snobbish, conventional, and misogynistic society. And she is slavishly filial, not only towards her paternalistic guardian, but also toward her absconding father" (Doody 1988: 40). Burney is considered ambiguous because of characters like *Evelina*; at first *Evelina* can be found making fun of the people around her but she ends up a stereotypical wife, subordinate to her husband. Some of Burney's contemporaries did not know what to make of her work either, which was proven when Samuel Johnson called her a "toadling."

Personally, I am of the opinion that there is a possibility that Burney was not out to deceive anyone; that she did not go out of her way to create a character who is simultaneously progressive and conservative. After all, it can be said that *Evelina* bears a resemblance to Burney's view on being a young woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and on marriage. In 1775, a Mr. Thomas Barlow proposed to Burney and she refused him. She did not want to be married, not to him – who she found dull – or to any other man she did not love. Samuel Crisp, a close friend of Burney's father and a man she held dear, urged her to accept so that she would be provided for, but Burney would not hear it. She did not want to lose her freedom (Doody 1988: 43). "Frances Burney's own experience when a Mr. Thomas Barlow proposed to her in 1775 has been taken by at least one recent critic as signaling Burney's unhappy education in male control of the marriage market, an education that influenced *Evelina*" (Doody 1988: 42). At first *Evelina* is free. Her life is not easy and granted, she chooses to turn to Mr. Villars for moral support, but eventually she has the opportunity to make her own decisions because he is in Berry Hill and she is not. Burney was free; of course she had her father to answer to but she helped him with his work and she loved doing that. Granted, she kept the fact that she had written *Evelina* from him for as long as she could because she was afraid of his critique, but that cannot be compared with living under a husband's rule. Burney implies that a woman is never as free as she is before she marries; she should enjoy that time even if that means straying from the image of the proper lady. The time to marry will come, society's rules command it, and then a woman must shape herself to fit into the conventional mold otherwise she will never truly be happy. On the other hand it cannot be denied that Burney's protagonist

is highly ambiguous. The only educated female character in the novel is an old widow – Mrs Selwyn – whose manners everybody frowns upon. Evelina criticizes Mrs. Selwyn’s tendency to be satirical, thinking it a masculine display of manner, but Evelina also loves ridiculing people. However, where Mrs. Selwyn does not hide her satire, Evelina’s satire is concealed; she “maintains female decorum by doing so [being satirical] only in the privacy of her letters” (Cutting 1977: 522). Evelina’s view on satire indicates that she is well aware of the propriety of her actions.

## 2.4 Feminism

The belief that *Evelina* was nothing more than a comedy of manner did not come from nowhere; social embarrassments and genteel virtues can be found in all of Burney’s novels. However, Burney should not be labeled a conservative writer on those grounds; there are feministic elements in her novel as well (Cutting 1977: 519). On Burney’s feminism Rose Marie Cutting wrote: “The preoccupation with propriety in Fanny Burney’s novels was balanced by another sort of development—a growing rebellion against the restrictions imposed upon women. In this sense, Fanny Burney was a feminist” (Cutting 1977: 519-520). Rules of propriety did not affect women alone; surely men were influenced as well. Cutting does not elaborate on the effects of propriety on men, which is not surprising; the focus in *Evelina* lies mainly with the lives of women, not with the lives of men. Although it cannot be denied that the novel displays how proper men should act as well. I will expand upon this aspect when discussing the first critics of the novel.

Burney rarely revealed her own feelings when it came to rebelling against traditional values, thus it remains hard to determine her stance, and easy to question her support for feminism. “In turning to farce Burney repudiates the restrictions of being ‘the proper lady’ and implicitly rebels against the *convenances* [sic]...” (Doody 1988: 49). If rebelling against restrictions imposed on women is feminism, then Burney was a feminist. For the major part of her novel that is. However, when using Wollstonecraft’s notion of feminism as a yardstick it becomes harder to classify Burney’s *Evelina* as feministic. Wollstonecraft’s most important aspect can hardly be found in Burney’s novel. Wollstonecraft wanted women to become “whole beings,” beings worthy of taking place next to God. *Evelina* does not deal with personal growth in that manner. Burney is concerned with life on earth only and on earth women must serve men; there is absolutely no need for women to become better people. This point of view can be connected to education, which is another important issue in

Wollstonecraft's manifesto. Burney suggests that Evelina does not need to be educated. *Evelina* is a "Bildungsroman" where "Bildung" has been deemed unnecessary.

Like many a young man, Evelina enters the world, is initiated into the nature of her society, and—one might argue—grows in prudence and good judgment. But the progress of Evelina's growth, unlike the progress of a young man's, is in conflict with her destiny. Although Evelina may acquire a certain skill in defending herself—no mean achievement in this novel—her responsibility as an adult is not to maintain that defense. Quite the opposite. Evelina's destiny is to be protected, to marry, and her preparation for that future is to abdicate rather than to maintain power ... Since Evelina is not responsible for the future, since her destiny is to be protected from, rather than to act upon, the world, we cannot attach to her growth the same significance we might attach to the growth of a young man. (Newton 1976: 53)

According to Judith Newton, Burney is under the impression that education is a waste of time for women who will marry eventually. The only female character in *Evelina* who is educated like a man is the old widow Mrs. Selwyn and she is looked upon as crude. Even Evelina criticizes her for displaying "masculine" manners. Mrs. Selwyn is the only woman who says what she likes; she even prides herself on her "masculine" knowledge (Newton 1976: 54). Burney seems to imply that there is nothing wrong with receiving a "male" education once you are released from the chains of marriage, but even then you cannot be fully free because society will condemn you anyway. Freedom is an option when one does not care about what others might think, but that freedom will automatically lead to exclusion from decent society.

There is no talk of equal rights in this novel; men are obviously the superior sex and that is final. There is nothing that even resembles a serious attempt to alter that reality. When using Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* as a yardstick for feminism it must be concluded that Burney is not a feminist. There is nothing in her work with a clear link to Wollstonecraft's pamphlet. If Burney has a place with one of the three best known feminists of the 1790s then she must be linked to Barbauld, to a certain extent. Burney clearly sees the difference between the sexes as innate, just like More and Barbauld. Unlike More, Burney does not advocate the traditional role of the sexes; she is resigned to those roles but she does not advocate them. Like Barbauld likes to see, Evelina tries to use her "angel pureness" to elevate men like Sir Clement to a higher moral level, a level where they no longer hound her. Evelina is not

successful; her marriage to Lord Orville changes matters and not her angelic countenance, but the method she uses to try and make a difference resembles the one Barbauld described. According to Barbauld, women should use their softness to persuade men into becoming better human beings (Johnson 2002: 154). Despite the lack of open rebellion and despite the absence of demands for equal rights, there is some feminism to be found in *Evelina*. It is hidden behind layers of genteel virtues and clouds of resignation but Burney's revolt against the limited options women had cannot be overlooked.

### **2.5 *Evelina* in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

As mentioned before, *Evelina* was seen by an older school of critics as an attempt to display various manners. In September 1778, the *Critical Review* declared that:

... the experienced mother will derive pleasure and happiness from being present at its [*Evelina*'s] reading; even the sons of the family will forego the diversions of the town or the field to pursue the entertainment of *Evelina*'s acquaintance, who will imperceptibly lead them, as well as their sisters, to improvement and to virtue. (Gonda 1996: 111)

As mentioned before, 20<sup>th</sup> century critic Cutting did not see the necessity to deal with male behavior in *Evelina*; Burney's contemporaries disagreed. *Evelina* does not just show women how to behave; it educates men as well.

In 1907 the revised edition of *The Early Diaries of Frances Burney 1768-1778 V2* was published. In this literary work Austin Dobson "complained of 'a touch of tenderness' in the authors treatment [of certain characters]" (Doody 1988: 48). Other contemporaries of Dobson also commented on Burney's display of human interaction; the usage of violent, farcical actions in the novel was the centre of their attention. They attributed those offensive parts to the "novelist's incompetence or inexperience" (Doody 1988: 48).

### **2.6 *Evelina* in Modern Times**

Modern critics study *Evelina* for its portrayal of parental absence, the situation of women at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and other aspects that are a part of the novel's plot. In other generations *Evelina* was seen as a "how-to book" on manners and as a novel that contained so many violent, ludicrous actions that it was offensive; nowadays the novel is viewed as a weak attempt to create an independent woman and as an attempt to display the ridiculousness of the

restrictions imposed on women. There is something to be said for all of the above; all these aspects can be deduced from *Evelina*, which explains why this novel is perceived by some as “two-faced” (Doody 1988: 40). What cannot be denied is that Burney described the fate of women in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; the only job they had was obtaining a husband. Without a husband they would not be seen as full members of society – to the extent that women could be full members – and with a husband they were forced to alter their personalities in order to be perceived as proper ladies. Burney is not as radical as Wollstonecraft, More or Barbauld but she should not be overlooked in a discussion on the history of feminism in English literature. Burney showed how the patriarchal society pressured women into becoming beings who are unable to be completely free: wives. A novel on women having to conform in order to be accepted belongs in the feminist discourse.

## Jane Austen and *Emma*

### 3.1 Emma

Emma Woodhouse is one of Jane Austen's most criticized characters; out of all of Austen's heroines she is clearly most convinced of her own importance, a character trait not much valued in a woman in those times. Upon creating Emma, Austen declared: "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like" (Johnson 1990: 122). Austen's statement was sound; society dictated that women in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were not to be outspoken and independent, but Emma is. She has something women are not supposed to have, especially not women of her age and in her position; Emma has power. In this chapter I will discuss what *Emma* says about Austen's feminism; is the novel feminist as Margaret Lenta suggests (Lenta 1981: 31), or is the novel "harmless amusement" (Southam 1968: 70)? Emma is a nearly twenty-one year old, beautiful, intelligent and rich woman. Due to a father who all but ignores the fact that he is a parent and a lack of brothers or other male relatives who might have been of influence, Emma is free to live her life as she pleases. No one in the novel "questions her right to preeminence" (Johnson 1990: 126), not even Mr. Knightley, the older brother of her brother-in-law and the only person who tries to temper her. However, Emma is convinced that she knows what is best for people and she acts according to her own set of rules. Her conviction of knowing what is best for others is so strong that she completely ignores the opinion of others. Her friend Harriet Smith obviously has feelings for the farmer Robert Martin but Emma will hear none of it since she is convinced that Mr. Elton will make Harriet a better husband. In her awe of Emma, Emma being higher on the social ladder and being such a strong personality, Harriet does nothing to make Emma believe that her feelings for Robert Martin are genuine. Emma is in a better position in life and Emma has taken it upon herself to befriend her so surely Emma knows what is best for her. Mr. Knightley warns Emma not to interfere with Mr. Elton: "... leave him to chuse [sic] his own wife. Depend upon it, a man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself" (Austen 1994: 12). Emma ignores this and by doing so she implies that she knows better than a man what is good for him, an implication that was quite radical in the early 1800s.

*Emma* has all the elements of a romantic novel; the man, the woman, the sudden realization of their love for each other and the happily ever after ending. However, the characters that play a part in this story, and in particular their relationships with each other, differ greatly from a "standard" romantic novel in those days. *Emma* does not just differ from novels by other authors on similar subjects; *Emma* is different from other Austen novels as

well. It is true that *Pride & Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet is outspoken, just like Emma, but unlike Emma, Elizabeth does not have the freedom to stay unwed. The novel shows that no one can force Elizabeth to marry, but her situation is a great motivator for matrimony. Remaining single means that after her father's death Elizabeth has to rely on either a married sister or other relatives for her upkeep; Emma is rich and would have had no worries. When Harriet questions Emma's statement that she has little intention of ever marrying, Emma replies:

“I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield...” (Austen 1994: 66-67)

Emma believes that she will still be respected by the community if she is to be an old, unmarried woman because she will never be poor. She states that: “it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to the generous public” (Austen 1994: 67). However, not every one in Emma's vicinity grants her liberties without commenting; at Box Hill Mrs. Elton makes it perfectly clear that she is not in the habit of taking orders from young, unmarried ladies (Austen 1994: 279). Society grants wives a certain status that Emma will never obtain, fortune of not.

### 3.2 Marriage-plot Novel

Like *Evelina*, *Emma* is a marriage-plot novel that seems to contain the lover-mentor convention but with somewhat of a twist. Mr. Knightley obviously longs to be Emma's mentor, which is not surprising. She is a young woman who has never really been guided by anyone. Her mother died when she was a child and as mentioned before her father had never taken any interest in actually being a parent to her. They are very fond of each other but in their relationship the authority lies with Emma, a fact she does not emphasize.

Mr. Woodhouse's two-fold hostility to disruption and indigestion so unfits him for the duties incumbent upon the head of a respected household that Emma is often obliged to ignore or to oppose him quietly for decency's sake, and in the process she displays



powers of delicacy and forbearance which are the more impressive given the vivacity of her own temper and the incisiveness of her wit. (Johnson 1990: 130)

Despite his inability to run a household and his lack of parenting skills, Mr. Woodhouse did see that his daughters needed to be educated and he hired a governess. “Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse’s family, less a governess than a friend ... very fond ... of Emma. Between *them* it was more the intimacy of sisters” (Austen 1994: 5). This reveals that even the person who had been hired to educate Emma had not been an authoritative figure to her. Every now and then Mr. Knightley, whom Emma has known since she was a little girl, tries to steer Emma in a direction that differs from the one she wants to follow. His attempts are futile because Emma refuses to heed anyone’s mind but her own. She is often so convinced of her own justness that she does not even consider the possibility of someone else being in the right.

Austen has incorporated the lover-mentor convention and the convention of the perfect heroine in this story. Mr. Knightley attempts to teach Emma that not everything is always as she sees it. Throughout the novel the reader can witness his efforts followed by Emma’s dismissal of them. If Emma had been willing to learn, the novel would have contained the lover-mentor convention and nothing else. However, Emma does not want to learn anything; she sees herself as the perfect heroine and so do the majority of the people around her. Perfect heroines are done with their education; they already know everything they need to know and their duty is to be an inspiration to others. Emma thinks she is a perfect heroine and she tries to be an inspiration to Harriet. Like Emma, first time readers might be lead astray and the convention of the perfect heroine appears to befit the novel. As the story progresses readers – and Emma – discover that they are mistaken. Emma’s reasoning is wrong; there is no perfect heroine in this novel. As mentioned before, the lover-mentor convention that seems to be incorporated in this story has a twist. This convention refers to a man educating a woman and marrying her once her education is complete. Emma does learn and she does marry Mr. Knightley, but the difference is that Mr. Knightley does not teach her. He attempts to educate her, but she will not hear of it; what Emma learns, she learns from her own mistakes. Emma is her own mentor; therefore the lover-mentor convention cannot be applied to this novel.

### 3.3 Patriarchy

The title of Claudia L. Johnson chapter on *Emma* in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* is “Woman, Lovely Woman Reigns Alone.” For the majority of the novel this title is true; Emma answers to no one. As mentioned before there is no authoritative figure she bows to. Without a mother, but with a married sister and a father who is as convinced of Emma’s superiority as she is herself, Emma dominates the Woodhouse household. The position she has at home is reflected in the position she has in Highbury. Emma is not the only female character in the novel who is clearly used to having her way; Mrs. Elton’s notion of superiority is also impossible to overlook. She has taken it upon herself to provide Jane Fairfax with a governess post despite Jane’s protests. Eventually it becomes clear that Jane does not need that occupation because she is free to marry Frank Churchill. With the exception of Mr. Knightley women are in control in *Emma*; they control their own fates and they attempt to control those of others. This viewpoint implies that Austen was not a supporter of the patriarchal society. “... female authority ... is the subject of *Emma*” (Johnson 1990: 122). However, the women make a mess out of things. Emma makes mistakes concerning Harriet that almost lead to Harriet ending up with no husband at all and Mrs. Elton is wrong about Jane. Mrs. Elton tries to be to Jane what Emma is to Harriet: a mentor who is followed without being questioned. The female characters who want to wield most power make most mistakes.

Emma appears indifferent to the opinion of others but that is not the case. The majority of the people that surround her are convinced of her good qualities and they would not even consider speaking out against her. Her former governess declares: “... where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times” (Austen 1994: 31). It is not difficult to agree with everyone when they think you are in the right all the time. Due to the position of power Emma holds it appears as if she obeys no laws but she holds public opinion in high esteem. For instance, she does not like Mrs. Elton and it is very probable that she could have made that clear without losing – too much – face, but Emma is resolved to stay civil because that is what is expected of her. Despite the appearance of living in matriarchal society, Emma does follow some patriarchal rules, which is proven when Mr. Knightley proposes to her. She will not marry him if it displeases her father. Throughout the novel Emma has done as she pleases but when it comes to a decision that might displease her father his opinion matters more than anything. Emma has more freedom than most women of her age, but up to a certain extent she too is committed to the rules of a patriarchal society; eventually she heeds her father’s wishes and she expresses the wish to become more worthy of Mr. Knightley. “If *Emma* begins with

the assumption of a broad and useful female rule independent from masculine supervision, then, it does not end with the assertion of its sufficiency” (Johnson 1990: 140). Societies ruled by women alone are doomed to fail due to the mess women will inevitably make. Critics who see Austen as a conservative are happy with the outcome of this novel; the allegedly free female protagonist is bound to her father’s wishes and she acknowledges that she must learn to become more worthy of Mr. Knightley, the superior man in her life.

Despite the aforementioned information that implies that Austen favored the patriarchal society it must be stated that she was not against women having more power, to a certain extent and under male supervision. “Though it may favor male rule, the social system sustained in *Emma* recognizes female rule as well, and it is in this system that Emma, in the absence of any social superiors, owes her preeminence” (Johnson 1990: 127). It is not Emma’s place to play matchmaker. By marrying Harriet off to Robert Martin, Austen implies that some men know more about suitable marriages than women; Mr. Knightley is in favor of Harriet marrying Robert Martin from the beginning. Nowadays marriage is perceived as a feminine matter but in Austen’s day that was not the case; often it resembled a business transaction. Mr. Knightley does not consider emotion when he speaks in favor of the match; his conviction is based on sense. Emma is out of her element in that situation, but she is given more power in others. Emma wants to marry Mr. Knightley but she does not want to leave her father; Mr. Knightley agrees to move in with the Woodhouses and all obstacles are overcome. This twist gives a liberal tinge to a conservative ending. By agreeing to move in with Emma, Mr. Knightley “gives his blessing to her rule” (Johnson 1990: 143). This ending seems to clash with patriarchal conceptions; men hold power in all important institutions, the home as well. By moving Mr. Knightley into the Woodhouse home, Austen appears to suggest that women can have power but only in “female” realms, such as the home. This would give the novel a semi-feministic ending. However, the most important aspect in this situation is that Mr. Knightley gives Emma power. He is a good man who does not mind making sacrifices for the woman he loves. Emma’s house will be their home because Mr. Knightley agrees to it; female power is the result of an action by a man.

### **3.4 Rationalism vs. Sensibility**

As mentioned before, Mr. Knightley looks at Harriet’s marriage prospects in a rational fashion and, despite her mistake, Emma does the same. In Mr. Elton she sees a man who can elevate Harriet’s social status through marriage, thus putting an end to the mystery that surrounds her due to her obscure birth. Emotion motivates neither Emma nor Mr. Knightley.

Emma's lack of sensibility is seen in the way she deals with Harriet's grief over Mr. Elton marriage as well.

“Your allowing yourself to be so occupied and so unhappy about Mr. Elton's marrying, Harriet, is the strongest reproach you can make *me*. You could not give me a greater reproof for the mistake I fell into. It was all my doing, I know. I have not forgotten it, I assure you.—Deceived myself, I did very miserably deceive you—and it will be a painful reflection to me for ever. Do not imagine me in danger of forgetting it ... I have not said, exert yourself Harriet for my sake ... I would wish it to be done, for the sake of what is more important than my comfort, a habit of self-command in you ... to save your health and credit, and restore your tranquility.” (Austen 1994: 202)

These words Emma utters seem full of concern for Harriet, but Emma is manipulating her. Before this speech the narrator gives the reader this information: “At last Emma attacked her on another ground” (Austen 1994: 201). Emma is not maudlin and she has little patience for those who are. She feels remorse but she does not want to be emotional about it. When you make a mistake you acknowledge that and you move on. Despite the rationality of the two main characters “...*Emma*, which celebrates rational marriage, also offers credence to passionate and reckless love” (Copeland 1997: 72). Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax got engaged without telling anyone out of fear that Frank would be disowned. When the two are simultaneously in Highbury there are signs that indicate that something is not quite right between them but Emma does not suspect anything. “What she misses in Frank and Jane's situation is a romantic element that simply is foreign to her sensibility” (Copeland 1997: 71). Between her and Jane, Emma is the most rational. Jane lets her emotion take the upper hand and as a result she is miserable, unable to tell anyone of her situation. Both women marry the men they love at the end of the novel, but from the differences between their paths to the altar it can be deduced that Austen favored rationality above sensibility. Jane's situation is drastic; for a while it looks as if she has to break off her engagement and become a governess. With the death of Mrs. Churchill Austen seems to be giving her a happy ending, reluctantly.

### 3.5 Feminism

In her article “Jane Austen's Feminism: An Original Response to Convention” Margaret Lenta quotes Lionel Trilling: “Emma has a moral life as a man has a moral life” (Lenta 1981: 31). For a woman to be compared to a man in this fashion was unheard of. It is a small step from

Lenta's statement to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. Wollstonecraft declared that women and men were created by God as equals; their only goal was to live a life that God would approve of: "... the extent to which women have or ought to have moral lives in the same way as men have moral lives was very hotly and accessibly debated in Austen's time, as were other issues pertaining to female sexuality in particular and sexual difference in general" (Johnson 1990: xxxiii). In *Vindication* Wollstonecraft writes very passionately about her belief that there is no innate difference between the sexes. The suggestion that Emma has a moral life that resembles that of a man also indicates a lack of difference between genders; on this subject the two authors can be placed together. An important difference is the foundation of this moral life; Wollstonecraft believed both sexes had a moral life and that the acceptance of that fact would enable women to love God without restrictions and Austen gave Emma a "male" moral life so she could love herself without restrictions. Wollstonecraft wanted women to be able to love themselves so that they could become better people and thus better servants of God; in *Emma*, Emma simply loves herself. The underlying thought in both situations is that men should not be part of this equation. "Emma does not think of herself as an incomplete or contingent being whose destiny is to be determined by the generous or blackguardly actions a man will make towards her" (Johnson 1990: 124). The feministic aspect here is similar; women have to love themselves and they must not be controlled by the men they love or by that love itself. Wollstonecraft went further and turned to religion: in *Emma*, Austen did not.

On education Austen does not seem to agree with Wollstonecraft. "What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him [Mr. Knightley], whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future" (Austen 1994: 360). Emma does want to learn but not in the manner that Wollstonecraft advocated. Wollstonecraft spoke of being better educated in order to be more aware of the world around you and in order to be a better human being: Emma wants to become a better person to be worthy of Mr. Knightley and nothing more. Austen implies that education is a necessity, as long as it is well-placed. Emma makes her own social ladder and she places Harriet quite high, without having any proof to justify that. By taking Harriet under her wing Emma is educating her above her station and because of this education Harriet is persuaded to believe that Mr. Elton is her equal and that he will marry her; both persuasions are false. People must only receive the amount of education they need in order to function properly within their own sphere. On this matter Austen does appear to agree with Wollstonecraft. On her stance with regard to education Wollstonecraft declares: "I pay particular attention to those in the middle class"

(Wollstonecraft 2001: Introduction). Both women saw nothing good coming from education above one's station.

Austen was in favor of men giving more power to women but she did not advocate equality like Wollstonecraft did. Despite the fact that Austen created Emma to have a moral life similar to that of a man, *Emma* speaks of a division between the world of man and the world of woman. Women did deserve rights, but up to a certain extent and men had to supply them with those rights. Austen supported female power but she felt that it would only cause chaos without male supervision. This stance places Austen closer to More than Wollstonecraft. Both More and Austen see a difference between men and women and a difference in the power they should have. The biggest contrast lies with those responsible for reform. According to More it is primarily up to women to change society (Johnson 2002: 148); Austen thinks men must contribute as well by allowing women to have more freedom. Austen was a feminist but she was not as radical as for instance Wollstonecraft; Austen wanted to see women obtain more power but only under male guidance. Women should not demand equal rights; it is up to men to distribute power where they see fit.

### 3.6 Emma as Sheer Amusement

Sir Walter Scott wrote the first major critical review on a work by Austen; in March 1816, his review of *Emma* was published in the *Quarterly Review*. Scott does not write about disliking the heroine, despite Emma's "power-hungry" character. The only point of critique Scott gives is on the detailed description of characters like Miss Bates; they are too ridiculous to be presented as often as they are and that makes them tiresome (Southam 1968: 68). In July 1816, an anonymous reviewer of *Emma* wrote in *Gentleman's Magazine*: "Dulce est desipere in loco", which can be translated to: "It is pleasant to indulge in trifles" (Southam 1968: 72). *Emma* was perceived as a light tale, for entertainment only.

In 1923, R.W. Chapman published *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*. Chapman completely ignored the political references in Austen's work and he was under the impression that she was in the literary canon only because she had been willing and able to record the elegant manners of her time. "Allusions to the riots in London, or the slave trade in Antigua, for example, are first passed over, and then believed not to exist at all" (Johnson 1990: xvii). The riots in London are mentioned in Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* and references to slave trade in Antigua can be found in *Mansfield Park*. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax compares becoming a governess to being a slave. "... I was not thinking of the slave-trade ... governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those

who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies...” (Austen 1994: 227). References Austen made to controversial, political issues that took place during her lifetime were ignored; taking that into consideration it is not hard to see her novels as merely light reading.

### **3.7 Emma as Critique of a Matriarchy**

Nowadays critics do closer readings of Austen’s novels and it is being discovered that she was more involved with the world around her than her contemporary reviewers gave her credit for. The image of her as the ultimate romance novelist and nothing but that has not ceased to exist; Chapman was very influential and his views on Austen have survived to this day. Still, the many layers that Austen’s novels possess are being peeled back. Due to more research I can establish that e.g. Sir Walter Scott’s review is not focusing on all the important aspects in the novel; any review on *Emma* that does not deal with feminism is incomplete. In *Emma*, Austen created a world where women were in control and she all but let that world fall to pieces. Austen was a supporter of women having more power but not without the control of men and not despite the existence of men. Women need to know their boundaries and men need to determine where those boundaries lay. *Emma* shows that Austen was in favor of the expansion of female rights but only in a society that acknowledged the superiority of men.

## Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre*

### 4.1 Brontë vs. Austen

Jane, the heroine in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, suffers a great deal before she finds happiness with the man she loves, Mr. Rochester. The same can be said for the heroines of e.g. Jane Austen. However, unlike a Fanny Price, Jane does not accept her fate demurely. Jane rebels against the injustices done to her, which can be perceived as feministic. In a 1848, Brontë wrote a letter to critic G.H. Lewes in which she claimed that Jane Austen could never be great because her writings lacked sentiment and poetry (Smith 2007: 100). Both Austen and Brontë wrote marriage-plot novels – with sometimes rather unconventional heroines – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; both women had success doing so and both women are still very popular. Brontë herself declared that she saw a great difference between herself and Austen. Nowadays they are often thrown together as romantic voices of the past (Franssen 2001). One of the biggest differences between these two authors is their use of rationalism and passion; Austen merely favored the former and Brontë felt that both should be combined while dealing with romantic relationships; passion must never be forgotten. With her statement on the importance of sentiment Brontë implies that a portrayal of a woman who lives rationally without displaying any passion is not a realistic portrayal of a woman. Women can possess the sensibility attributed to them while remaining rational creatures, a concept of great importance in modern feminism. Women should be seen as human beings who are able to decide between passion and rationality on their own accord.

Brontë's preference for passion becomes clear in her novel *Jane Eyre*. As an orphan living with her aunt Mrs. Reed and three cousins, Jane refuses to answer their abuse with silence. Jane tries to be a good girl but nothing she does is good enough for her aunt and at a young age Jane speaks out against unfair treatment:

“You [Mrs. Reed] think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity. I shall remember how you thrust me back—roughly and violently thrust me back—into the red-room, and locked me up there, to my dying day; though I was in agony; though I cried out, while suffocating with distress, ‘Have mercy! Have mercy, Aunt Reed!’ And that punishment you made me suffer because your wicked boy struck me—knocked me down for nothing. I will tell anybody who asks me questions, this exact tale. People think you a good woman, but you are bad; [sic] hard-hearted. *You* are deceitful!” Ere I had finished this reply,



my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhopèd-for liberty. (Brontë 1869: 32)

Her aunt sends her to an institution for educating orphans to be rid of her and there Jane is treated badly by its owner Mr. Brocklehurst. Despite the fact that Jane spends a substantial part of her childhood being forced to listen to people speaking ill of her for reasons that are unjust, she is not inclined to believe them and she does not hold grudges. When Mrs. Reed is lying on her death bed, Jane wants to put their bad past behind them but Mrs. Reed will not have it and Jane is resigned: “‘Love me, then, or hate me, as you will,’ I said at last, ‘you have my full and free forgiveness: ask now for God’s, and be at peace’” (Brontë 1869: 244). Jane is a passionate, resourceful young woman who longs for nothing but a place where she can feel at home, a place where she can be herself without being judged for it. *Jane Eyre* is a “Bildungsroman”; the protagonist is followed from her childhood into adulthood and she visits many places where she learns more about the society she lives in and her own capabilities. Unlike what Burney implied with *Evelina*, Brontë does appear to see the necessity of becoming a grown woman with one’s own thoughts. The “Bildung” that takes place in this novel is all Jane’s doing; by venturing out into the world she learns more about the kind of woman she is.

In this chapter I will discuss Brontë’s alleged feminism by looking at the character of Jane and at the story as a marriage-plot novel. I also intend to take a closer look at the patriarchal society; here I will discuss what the character of Bertha Rochester implies about Brontë’s opinion of that social structure. The suffering of Mr. Rochester will also be discussed with regard to the patriarchy. Eventually, I will compare Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* to Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* to determine the extent of Brontë’s feminism.

#### **4.2 Marriage-plot Novel**

*Jane Eyre* is a marriage-plot novel; it ends with a marriage. However, it differs from the majority of marriage-plot novels that came out around the time that Brontë’s work was first published. The conventional lover-mentor convention can be found in the novel but only to a certain extent and it is in reverse. It is not Mr. Rochester who marries Jane once he has educated her on life; it is Jane who marries Mr. Rochester once all the obstacles – obstacles he wanted to overlook but Jane could not due to her morals – are out of way. Mr. Rochester claims Jane makes him a better person and there is no denying that he is less of a cad when

she is in his life, but Jane's presence did not do away with all of his immorality. His love for her makes him put aside what is right; he is more than willing to commit bigamy to make her his. Neither Mr. Rochester nor Jane teaches the other how to live their lives. Mr. Rochester admits that Jane is right when she chooses to leave him rather than become his mistress, but that realization comes to him after he loses a hand and his sight. Events make him question his former actions, not Jane's morals.

### 4.3 Patriarchy

*Jane Eyre* is filled with critique of the patriarchal structure people were living in in those days. Jane is openly rebelling against it by declaring her desire for freedom and by expressing that she too has the right to her own thoughts. She is very opposed to Mr. Rochester putting her on a pedestal by referring to her in terms that can never be applied to a human being. "‘I am not an angel,’ I asserted; ‘and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate’" (Brontë 1869: 265). As mentioned before, Jane longs for the freedom to be herself without being judged for it. That desire does not fit within a patriarchal society; women have to conform to what men want. In this novel there are three male characters who try to dominate Jane in different ways: Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John and Mr. Rochester. Mr. Brocklehurst attempts to break her spirit when she is a little girl, informing all others at the school to shun her because she is evil. Jane fears that everyone will listen to him but that is not the case; Mr. Brocklehurst is far from liked and his judgment is not trusted. Jane's cousin St. John Rivers proposes to her more than once; her refusals falls on deaf ears. They argue often on the subject; St. John thinks her reason for refusing him – lack of love on both sides – ridiculous. If they are to go to India together as missionaries then they must be wed. He is convinced that enough love will come to satisfy Jane. Jane does not see the need to get married simply because they will go to India together, which is a statement that goes against the rules of a patriarchal society. A young woman accompanying a man approximately ten years her senior to another country without any bonds firmly established between them? Quite unheard of. However, Jane thinks it is quite possible.

“It would do,” I affirmed with some disdain, “perfectly well. I have a woman’s heart, but not where you are concerned; for you I have only a comrade’s constancy; a fellow-soldier’s frankness, fidelity, fraternity, if you like; a neophyte’s respect and submission to his hierophant: nothing more—don’t fear.” ... “I scorn your idea of

love,” I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaning my back against the rock. “I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it.” (Brontë 1869: 420)

Jane longs to have St. John’s friendship; she values him, cares for him and she wants him to care for her as well, but she refuses to be talked into anything and she has no trouble expressing that in manners that can be perceived as quite offensive.

According to Jean Wyatt, Bertha Rochester is the embodiment of the effects a patriarchal society can have on women (Wyatt 1985: 199). Bertha is the mad woman in the attic, hidden from the world by Mr. Rochester who is bound to her and bound by her; they are married so he cannot marry another, but she is mentally ill so he cannot have her as a wife in any sense of the word. Bertha and Mr. Rochester were married approximately fifteen years before Jane came along and their marriage – after four years Rochester feels compelled to imprison Bertha in the attic – has never been a happy one.

“I [Rochester] found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger—when I found that I could not pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day with her in comfort; that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started, immediately received from her a turn at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile ... I tried to devour my repentance and disgust in secret; I repressed the deep antipathy I felt.” (Brontë 1869: 313)

It can be argued that Bertha loses her mind because she marries Rochester. Bertha is brought over to England from Jamaica as a wife to a man who clearly cannot stand her; in a patriarchal society husbands rule over their wives so Bertha is forced to live her life following a man who all but hates her. That could not have been easy. She lives away from everyone she has ever known, in a country foreign to her, in a house that cannot possibly have ever felt like a true home. Rochester locks Bertha in the attic because she has gone mad but he imprisons her the moment he marries her, as was tradition in most marriages in patriarchal societies. Bertha’s mental state might not be Mr. Rochester’s doing; she comes from a family with a history of mental illness but before she came to England there was no sign of that. There is no way of knowing what triggered Bertha’s illness, but it befits the novel to place –

some of – the blame with Mr. Rochester and the patriarchal society. There are more events that imply that Bertha opposes a marriage that follows the rules of the patriarchy; the day before Jane is to marry Mr. Rochester, Bertha sneaks into Jane's room and destroys her wedding veil. This can be seen as the rage of a wife who wants to prevent her husband from marrying another, but this can also be seen as an attempt to save Jane from a fate similar to Bertha's. Eventually Bertha burns down Thornfield Hall and she commits suicide; this could be the actions of a madwoman but that conclusion would be too simple. It cannot be denied that Bertha is not sane, but she does think before she acts. When Mr. Rochester brings people to the attic to show them why he keeps her imprisoned she attacks him; when her brother comes to stay she stabs her brother. Bertha's anger is aimed at the men she knows. When Jane contemplates what it would be like to be St. John's wife, she draws a parallel between herself and Bertha without mentioning the first Mrs. Rochester. "... as his [St. John's] wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—*this* would be unendurable" (Brontë 1869: 419-420). By saying this Jane makes Bertha more human, more of a wife. Jane imagines that she will not be able to bear it if she cannot be herself, if she is constantly restrained in her actions by another; this is exactly what happened to Bertha. She lost her freedom and her mobility and it drove her mad (Wyatt 1985: 208). In her madness she burns down Thornfield Hall; flames destroy her prison just as imprisoned inner flames would destroy the person Jane is if she marries St. John.

Brontë ruins the patriarchy in *Jane Eyre*; at the end Mr. Rochester is not the strong man who attempts to make people do what he wants, not anymore. Brontë takes everything from him that places him above Jane, except for his wealth and his birth. The former is no longer an issue because Jane has become wealthy herself and the latter cannot be changed but it was never something that separated Jane and Mr. Rochester. True, Jane is of an inferior background but that did not bother her half as much as the lack of funds that came with that. By taking away his eyesight and one of his hands Brontë takes away the physical supremacy Mr. Rochester had over Jane due to their gender differences; by burning down Thornfield Hall Brontë strips Mr. Rochester of his patriarchal home. The house Jane and Mr. Rochester inhabit once they are married is more hers than Thornfield Hall could ever have been. Property belonged to men in those days but the claim Mr. Rochester could have made on Thornfield Hall would have been much bigger than the claim he can make on their new home; Jane did not enter his domain in the manner that she would have done with Thornfield Hall.

Also, Jane clearly turns her back on the patriarchal society when she leaves Mr. Rochester. “Jane leaves the patriarchal mansion governed by Rochester to find work and establish a family of her own” (Wyatt 1985: 205). Granted, Mr. Rochester had nothing to offer her but a life of sin. She would be loved and she would love, but they could never make that love legal due to Bertha’s existence, so officially she would have been his mistress. Jane refuses to belong to Mr. Rochester in this manner and she leaves everything behind. Soon she finds that she can perfectly manage on her own; she does not need a husband to support her in any way. She does not need Mr. Rochester’s wealth and she does not need the “marriage of companionship” that St. John offers.

Brontë’s disdain for the patriarchy goes beyond her female characters; she includes its negative effects on men as well. “Jane and Rochester are both victims of the conventions of the English landed class—he by virtue of being an insider, she ... by virtue of being an outsider. It may not unreasonably be argued that Rochester’s miseries and corruption stem from his subservience to the demands of his situation” (Kendrick 1994: 248). Like a good son Mr. Rochester listens to his father and marries Bertha, which brings him nothing but agony. Brontë seems to imply that no one benefits from the rules of a patriarchal society. Despite this point of view there is no overstepping of boundaries in *Jane Eyre*. Brontë notes the effects of the patriarchy without letting her characters rebel against it in a manner that is unheard of. Granted, Jane wants to accompany St. John without marrying him, but that does not happen. It is also true that Jane is very outspoken and that she places herself first where a supporter of the patriarchy might have chosen differently, but being “headstrong” is not the same as mutinying against authority.

#### **4.4 Feminism**

Jean Wyatt writes that: “On the level of lucid and compelling rhetoric, Brontë advocates feminist ideals—arguing against patriarchal structures that confine and subordinate women and for a wider field for women’s endeavors—while underneath flows, unchecked, a passionate desire for the fusions of romantic love” (Wyatt 1985: 213-214). Like in many other 19<sup>th</sup> century novels that focus on the life of one woman, *Jane Eyre* ends in marriage. Some – feminist – critics look upon this ending as proof that Brontë, despite creating a heroine who feels very strongly about being independent, conforms to the traditional customs for women in her time. By letting Jane enter into marriage Brontë might imply that marriage is the only true happy ending for a woman. Towards the end of the novel, when Jane meets Mr. Rochester again, he tells her that she cannot always be his nurse and that she must marry. She

replies: “I don’t care about being married” (Brontë 1869: 449). This appears to be true. Brontë gives the impression that Jane just wants to be with Mr. Rochester. If God had not declared it sinful, if it did not go against what she believes in, Jane might have stayed with Mr. Rochester despite Bertha’s existence. Jane does not marry him because that is the only thing she can do as a proper lady; she marries him because she loves him. However, it can be argued that the critics who accuse Brontë of conforming to tradition make a valid point; Jane is a wealthy woman now and thus independent, but without Mr. Rochester – without a man – she is incomplete.

Jane feels better about accepting Mr. Rochester’s proposal the second time and not just because Bertha is no longer an obstacle. Like Mr. Rochester, Jane is now a wealthy person and his physical disabilities also make them more equal than husbands and wives usually were in those days. Jane tells Mr. Rochester: “I [Jane] love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (Brontë 1869: 459).

According to James Diedrick, “*Jane Eyre* can in fact be read and taught as a fictional counterpart to Wollstonecraft’s manifesto, dramatizing its heroine’s struggles with the very social construction Wollstonecraft analyzes so forcefully in her essay” (Diedrick 1993). The following quotation from *Jane Eyre* could also have been written by Wollstonecraft:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity [sic]: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 1869: 109)

Like Wollstonecraft, Brontë supported equality and she too does not seem to believe in an innate difference between the sexes. Jane declares that women feel in the same manner that

men feel; the differences between the sexes are there because society has dictated them as such. Therefore Brontë gives Jane wealth and strips Mr. Rochester of his physical dominance and his family home before she declares them equal and lets them marry. Male supremacy is based on the physical superiority of men and on the rights they have appropriated.

In her pamphlet Wollstonecraft claims that women should be free so they can become better human beings in order to serve God better. Religion plays a major role in Brontë's novel: Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane's school friend Helen Burns and St. John all display a certain form of Christianity, albeit negatively. Mr. Brocklehurst uses God's image of a good human being to point out other people's flaws whilst living an un-Godly life himself; St. John uses religion to guide him in every way, which seems to make it impossible for him to make allowances for human emotions and Helen is religious to the point where she sees goodness in everyone and is quick to forgive. Helen is the portrayal of a type of woman modern feminists fight against. In patriarchal societies women are allowed to be one of three characters: saint, whore or mother. Helen is the saint; she is so "perfect" it is unnatural. Jane's religious outlook differs from all of the above. To her God is a voice that guides her in her ways without forgetting that she must act towards people as they act towards her (Diedrick 1993). When her aunt and her cousins treat her as inferior she utters her emotions; the fact that she does that and the manner in which she does that would have shocked St. John. That is not very Christian behavior. On voicing why she must leave Mr. Rochester, Jane states: "I will keep the law given by God..." (Brontë 1869: 324). Like Wollstonecraft advocated, Jane turns to God to do the right thing; she does not let man tell her what her morals should be.

On education the two female writers also seem to see eye to eye. Jane has lived in the world. Granted, she has not sailed the seven seas but she has not spent her life in one house surrounded by the same people either. During her journeys she learns about herself and about her ability to survive without – the protection of – a man.

With *Jane Eyre* Brontë has shown that she was a feminist. She was not as radical as Wollstonecraft, despite their similarities. Brontë's heroine struggles with her sex; she knows that women are seen as inferior to men and that she is not as free as a man but she does not attempt to change that. An increase of her abilities to do as she pleases comes to her through luck; she inherits money, but she does not undertake anything herself to improve her situation. She knows she is bound and she comments on it but that is as far as it goes. Brontë resents the portrayal of women as objects; there she differs from Barbauld, and she does not advocate the traditional role of women which is what More favored.

#### 4.5 The Critics and *Jane Eyre*

Nowadays when *Jane Eyre* is discussed, Jane's refusal to become what those around her wish her to become – obedient child at Lowood, mistress to Mr. Rochester, wife to St. John – is the first thing on critics' minds. Here we have a heroine who does not allow men – or women – to persuade her to go against what she believes is right. When *Jane Eyre* was first published critics could not decide whether Currer Bell – the pseudonym Brontë used – was male or female. An anonymous review that was published in *Era* in November 1847, states: "It is no woman's writing" (Allott 1974: 79). Other 19<sup>th</sup> century critics state that the way Mr. Rochester and St. John are described is a perfect example of men being portrayed by a woman (Allott 1974: 85-86). This uncertainty aside, the majority of the first critics were very positive; Brontë's work was referred to as: "... one of the most powerful domestic romances which have been published for many years" (Allott 1974: 67). There is mention of Jane standing up against her oppressors and of other aspects in the novel that modern critics see as signs of feminism, but at that time it was not perceived as such. The *Christian Remembrancer* does wonder about the morality of the novel. "To say that *Jane Eyre* is positively immoral or antichristian would be to do its writer an injustice. Still it wears a questionable aspect..." (Allott 1974: 91). Next to the quality of the novel itself, Brontë's first audience focused on the portrayal of religion in her work; some people were outraged and deemed *Jane Eyre*: "...a book which no respectable man should bring into his family" (Allott 1974: 97). With time the focus on this novel has shifted; today religion does not matter to the majority of society, not like it did in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. For most modern critics the focus in *Jane Eyre* lies with Jane's struggle to find a place in the patriarchal society she lives in without relinquishing who she is and therefore Brontë's novel – which remains one of the most popular novels ever written – is of great importance when discussing feminism in literature.



## Conclusion

Determining whether an 18<sup>th</sup> century or a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel has feministic elements is not easy; in part because the term feminism as we know it nowadays did not exist then and in part because the closest thing there was to feminism in those days – Mary Wollstonecraft – was ignored due to her disgraceful reputation (Abrams 2001: 1405). Despite those facts it cannot be overlooked that centuries ago there were female authors who wrote about the changes they would like to see in the relationships between men and women. Wollstonecraft may not have been mentioned, but some of the ideas she expresses in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can clearly be found in work by for instance Charlotte Brontë. Wollstonecraft's pamphlet is long and detailed but her main focus lies with these three points: religion, education and the belief that there is no innate difference between the genders, which Wollstonecraft saw as proof that the sexes should be seen as equal.

The radical Wollstonecraft was not the only woman who wrote on female rights in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; the conservative Hannah More and the moderate Anna Letitia Barbauld also contributed to the debate on profeminism. These three influential writers agreed on e.g. radically improving the education of women, but they disagreed on other important matters. Unlike Wollstonecraft, More believed that there were substantial differences between men and women and that those differences resulted in men having different qualities than women. Women needed to have more rights but not because they were similar to men; equality and uniformity did not have to be interchangeable. More and Wollstonecraft did agree on the role of women in society; it was up to the fairer sex to carry out moral reform to advance the progress of civilization (Johnson 2002: 147). Barbauld agreed with More that there was an innate difference between the sexes but she disagreed with both More and Wollstonecraft on the role of women in society. According to Barbauld, women were delicate flowers who needed to stimulate a change in male behavior – and thus in society – by using their angelic pureness. She wanted more rights for women but those rights had to be obtained by using strictly “feminine” methods (Johnson 2002: 154).

Most female authors who wrote novels on the relationships between men and women were not as outspoken in their opinion on female rights as Wollstonecraft, More and Barbauld. According to Rose Marie Cutting traces of feminism can be found in Frances Burney's *Evelina*, which was published in 1778. Burney had no knowledge of *Vindication* and if Wollstonecraft's work is taken as a yardstick for feminism circa late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Burney was not a feminist. *Evelina* shows that she was resigned to the fate of women. Women lost their

freedom and their power as soon as they got married and because becoming a wife was the only goal they were stimulated to aspire to, loss of freedom was inevitable for a woman. Burney resented that but she did not do anything about it; women were subordinate to men and there was nothing to be done about it. Wollstonecraft advocated the education of women so that they for instance could have a better understanding of the world, but Burney's *Evelina* did not receive that education. Educating women in that fashion was pointless in Burney's eyes because they would become wives and their husbands would rule them; they did not need to know anything because they would have no rights. Wollstonecraft and Burney did not see eye to eye but a comparison between Burney's novel and Barbauld's opinion does show some similarities. Both women describe the use of "feminine" methods to change the character of men. However, where Barbauld was convinced that society could alter if that method was applied, Burney did not believe in it. *Evelina* tries to dissuade men from hounding her by remaining calm and angelic but they do not listen to her.

Feminism is more noticeable in Jane Austen's *Emma*. Unlike Burney, Austen did not accept society as it was; her female characters had more power than most real women had. However, the aspect that gives this novel a conservative tinge is Austen's lack of belief in the capability of women to wield power. *Emma* is an independent, headstrong woman; she does what she wants and hardly anyone objects. Austen diluted this feministic approach by letting *Emma* make numerous mistakes. Austen supported more power for women, but only when that power was given by men and if men were there to keep an eye on the women. A world where women can exercise power without a man to oversee their actions would be a chaotic world. Despite this obvious belief in the superiority of men, Austen was a feminist, even in comparison to Wollstonecraft. With *Emma*, Austen created a heroine with the moral life of a man. Austen allowed *Emma* to love herself without any restrictions (Johnson 1990: 123); Wollstonecraft also advocated the female right to love without limitations. However, Wollstonecraft wanted women to be free to love God to their full extent; Austen's *Emma* simply loved herself. Yet in both situations, men do not have a place. On education the women disagree; *Emma* wants to become a better person in order to be worthy of the man she loves. She does not want to learn to better herself for her own sake. *Emma* looks very feministic because the protagonist has a lot of power, but Austen's decision to curb that power because *Emma* wields it without taking into consideration that with power comes a moral responsibility is a very important aspect. The novel is still feministic because Austen did support more power for women, but – like it was in men – that power had to be linked to moral responsibilities. *Emma* has a moral life of a man, but she conducts herself "unmanly"

by refusing to accept accountability. Austen's emphasis on the difference between men and women – in particular the way they deal with responsibility – places her closer to the conservative More than to the radical Wollstonecraft.

Jane Eyre is not fully happy until she is on an equal footing with the man she loves. Charlotte Brontë displayed more feminist aspects than Burney and Austen. James Diedrick declared that *Jane Eyre* is Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* in prose (Diedrick 1993). The most important – and often overlooked – aspect in Wollstonecraft's work is her religion. From God she drew her knowledge of how to be a good woman; she relied on Him for the support of her virtue and it is from Him that she obtained her ability to reason (Johnson 2002: 100). Jane Eyre also turns to God to grant her morals and the strength to abide by them; the rules of society do not seem to matter to her because she lives her life with God as her guide. Both authors believe in equality and the innate similitude between the sexes. Brontë's protagonist declares that: "... women feel just as men feel..." (Brontë 1869: 109). On education Brontë also agrees with Wollstonecraft; during her journeys Jane learns more about her own capabilities. Despite all these similarities and Jane Eyre being a very strong-willed character, Brontë was not a radical as Wollstonecraft in her feminism. Jane does not try to change her situation; she is resigned to it. Like Burney, Jane knows that as a woman her options are limited and like Burney she does nothing about it. Jane complains, but that is as far as it goes. The events that lead to her and Mr. Rochester becoming nigh equals all happen without her input.

*Evelina*, *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* have something very important in common; the interpretation of all these novels has altered since they were first published. Interpreting a novel is hardly ever easy, especially not when dealing with ambiguous novels like *Evelina*; Burney's contemporaries found it difficult to interpret what it alludes to. Modern critics are often at a disadvantage because they can never fully understand the way society worked at the time the novel was published. A critic can read every work available on the 18<sup>th</sup> century but he will never be aware of everything. Wollstonecraft has proven that. She was hardly mentioned in literary – or any other – work because the citing of her name alone was scandalous. Despite this lack of visible, literal evidence, novels like *Jane Eyre* suggest that Wollstonecraft was very much a part of the female, literary world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The majority of Burney, Austen and Brontë's contemporary critics were guilty of the same thing; they overlooked "unfemale" aspects in the novels. Both *Evelina* and *Emma* were perceived as simple entertainment; absolutely nothing that indicated feminist thoughts can be found in contemporary reviews. With Burney the mistake is easily made because her

feministic thoughts are covered with a blanket of resignation; her contemporaries found it difficult to establish Burney's character because she was very ambiguous. *Evelina* was seen as a comedy of manners; the plot was all but ignored. Nowadays critics see in *Evelina* what it was like to be a woman at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; they discuss the effect of absent parents and other aspects of the plot.

The absence of focus on female power in contemporary reviews of Austen's *Emma* is harder to understand. A powerful heroine is forced to realize that she is incapable of wielding her power with positive results without the help of a man; there is no mention of this at all. Some modern critics see in Austen a radical, political person. The incorporation of controversial, political issues – like slavery and riots – in her works is much debated, as well as her creation of outspoken heroines such as Elizabeth Bennet and Emma. Austen's contemporaries paid no attention to these issues; Austen was seen as an entertainer. This view traveled well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in 1923, R.W. Chapman left out all Austen's political references when writing *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*.

Compared to *Evelina* and *Emma*, the contemporary reviews of Brontë's work have more in common with the way modern critics look at the story. The novel was very well received; the minority that opposed it did so for one reason: religion. Brontë's portrayal of Christianity was not accepted in all circles; some people claimed that no respectable man should have *Jane Eyre* in his house (Allot 1974: 97). Much was still overlooked when discussing Brontë's work, but at least critics were unable to read it and deem it merely an amusing tale. Most modern critics concern themselves with Jane's rebellion against what she perceives as wrong and Brontë's attitude towards the patriarchy.

That women were viewed differently in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is apparent, even in the literary field. Aspects that can only be described as feministic were overlooked in the past. It can be argued that critics chose to ignore this because it had no place in that society but that is very unlikely. Wollstonecraft was not excluded from polite society because of her *Vindication*; Godwin caused that with his *Memoires*. Society was changing; more people partook in the debate on whether or not women have or should have the same moral lives as men (Johnson 1990: xxxiii). Critics from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries did not mention feminism. Feminism as the term is defined today had another meaning back then and “the organized women's rights movement in Britain [started taking form] in the 1850s” (Women of Victorian Hastings). The fight for more female rights was slowly taking form; it was not yet a force to be reckoned with. The critique on *Jane Eyre* proves that the critics' attention was only drawn to subjects that were familiar to them and subjects that they perceived as important.

Nowadays religion is of smaller importance than it was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, thus the majority of modern critics could never become agitated over the portrayal of religion in *Jane Eyre*.

It is not possible to label an 18<sup>th</sup> century or a 19<sup>th</sup> century text with the modern definition of feminism and leave it at that; allowances have to be made for differences in society. All these authors displayed elements of protofeminism and all of them have something in common with either Wollstonecraft, More or Barbauld. There is no obvious “advocacy of women’s rights” to be found in any of the novels. What can be distinguished is for instance religion as a guide like Wollstonecraft described. It is easy to read centuries old texts and claim that there are traces of modern concepts to be found; there have been people who were far ahead of their time. However, in doing that it must not be overlooked that people from e.g. the 18<sup>th</sup> century expressed themselves in a different manner than people from later centuries. To modern readers it is obvious that Austen’s *Emma* comments on the ability of women to rule without supervision, but Austen’s contemporary critics read the novel as sheer entertainment. Who is closer to the truth? In determining whether or not these authors were feminists they must be compared to what feminism was in their time and that was Wollstonecraft. However, Wollstonecraft’s vision on female rights differs from the modern vision on a very crucial point: her religion. Religion has no place in modern feminism, but Wollstonecraft could not have written *Vindication* without it.

As mentioned in the introduction the debate on how Burney, Austen and Brontë longed to see women positioned in society is an ongoing one. As long as critics continue to look at the novels of these authors with modern conceptions in mind that will never change; there is always something to be found in novels that “might indicate the possibility that...” With regard to feminism Burney, Austen and Brontë can be compared to Wollstonecraft, More and Barbauld because they were contemporaries and what defined protofeminism was known to – and meant the same to – all of them. The modern definition of feminism has an entirely different foundation; to fully understand these novels and to determine their feminism, they have to be seen in the discourse of their time.

When looking at these three novels an upward tendency can be seen. Evelina is a girl who conforms to the rules of a patriarchal society without defiance. Emma is a girl who is forced to acknowledge that the world is a better place when men are in control but she remains convinced of her own abilities. Granted, she makes mistakes but she learns from them; she learns from her own mistakes. Jane’s refusal to conform to what men want, her resolve to stay true to herself, makes her a heroine most feminists can be proud of. Within 69

years female protagonists have gone from outwardly meek to openly bold, in these three novels that is. To determine if the desire for equal rights was truly on the rise among female authors – in their literary works – more novels need to be taken in consideration. However, *Evelina*, *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* suggest that the winds were shifting.

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